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Outrageous censorship

Much of the work of the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency is necessarily secret, though in the national interest it is important that congressional leaders keep tabs on them. But in other government agencies, lifetime pre-censorship of speeches, articles and books concerning the sources and methods of intelligence-gathering by employees is outrageous.

Before 1981, federal employees given access to secret information were asked to sign a pledge that they would not disclose it. That should have been enough. But in 1981 the administration began requiring pledges for lifetime pre-censorship, and more recently it proposed a new version requiring lifetime pre-censorship for talk and writing about "intelligence activities" as well as "intelligence sources or methods."

The proposed pledge revision caused an outcry in Congress, and on Feb. 14 the administration withdrew it. Chairmen of two House committees asked the General Accounting Office to check on censorship agreements in force. The GAO report, released last month, found that more than 120,000 federal employees now working have signed up to submit to censorship in advance. That is

a grotesquely large number.

It does not include about 45,000 military or civilian employees of the Defense Department now retired or reassigned. Nor does it include the CIA or the NSA, the Justice Department, the Department of Energy, the Office of Management and Budget and five other federal agencies that did not reply.

How important was all this for keeping secrets? The agencies told the GAO of 43 instances in 1983 when "classified" information was disclosed, but only one of these was made through a speech or a publication, and 34 of them were not deemed important enough to submit to the Justice Department for investigation.

But in the past year or so, the number of articles and books being reviewed for possible violations has gone way up, from 2,784 in 1981 to 10,088 in 1983. So much chaff and so little wheat!

The whole thing is a gross violation of what should be freedom of information and a big waste of taxpayers' money. A Texas congressman has proposed a law limiting censorship pledges to CIA and NSA employees.

Good idea. Wherever possible, Congress and the public should know what is going on.